Review Article: The citadel and the home place under siege

THE CITADEL AND THE HOME PLACE UNDER SIEGE

Robert Mason

Julian E. Zelizer. *On Capitol Hill: The Struggle to Reform Congress and Its Consequences, 1948–2000.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Photographs, notes, and index. xvi + 359 pp. $30.00.

Citadel, published in 1957, was a best-selling exploration of the contemporary U.S. Senate. Journalist William S. White sought to provide his readers with insights into the workings of the institution, a strikingly hierarchical, isolated, and secretive body. This was not an attack but a celebration of the Senate's club-like atmosphere, which White praised for its encouragement of bipartisan cooperation. Southern Democrats, whose seniority earned them special influence through control of committees, won notable praise in White's account for their promotion of stability and compromise.[1] But what White perceived as the Senate's strengths were antidemocratic weaknesses in the eyes of some politicians and activists who were then coalescing in pursuit of congressional reform. Julian Zelizer's *On Capitol Hill* is a very successful analysis of this coalition's origins, its long quest for reform that reshaped the House of Representatives as well as the Senate, and the unanticipated consequences of its legislative and procedural achievements. By the end of the twentieth century, the House and the Senate constituted a more open and less hierarchical legislature, but the partisan conflict that increasingly characterized Congress fueled new frustrations, including deeper public dissatisfaction with the political process.

This was an elite-led impetus to deepen Congress's democratic responsiveness, one that changed the institution dramatically without necessarily strengthening its connections with the people. *On Capitol Hill* underscores the obstacles to political reform and in particular the strength of an institution's resistance to disruptive change. "In the most basic of terms," Zelizer writes, "this book posits that reforming government is much harder work than most politicians or pundits admit" (p. 3). With its analysis of a successful effort to transform the procedures and structures of Congress, the book compellingly describes the subtle complexities involved in achieving this change and the paradoxical nature of its consequences.

Reviews in American History 33 (2005) 111–118

The Congress described by White was at the height of what Zelizer terms the committee era, characterized not only by strong committees and influential chairs whom seniority elevated to positions of leadership. Cozy relationships existed between the committees and the handful of relevant interest groups and between politicians and respectfully deferential journalists. Further characterizing the era were "secrecy in deliberations, a particular type of campaign process, the structure of districts, . . . [and] norms and rules that guided behavior among legislators" (p. 4). The nature of Congress changed fundamentally when the procedures and regulations that underpinned this committee era underwent wholesale reform, a process that was concentrated during the 1970s. These reforms attacked the role of committee chairs, weakened the importance of seniority, encouraged the development of subcommittees, reduced the power of filibusters, strengthened restrictions on campaign finance, created ethics codes, instituted an independent budget-development body, and boosted the significance of party caucuses.

The creation of a fragile coalition in support of reform is a central concern of the book. Race informed the initial quest for reform. A group of Democrats elected to Congress in the late 1940s found that the committee system threatened the achievement of an urban liberal agenda, even though, as Zelizer notes, during the New Deal this process had "facilitated a significant expansion of the state, with southern Democrats at the helm" (p. 24). Among a wide-ranging set of policy concerns, civil rights was especially significant in encouraging the coalition's coherence and its commitment to reform. This coalition enjoyed a notable and significant triumph in gradually defining the committee system as problematic despite its political strength and despite the general public's indifference to the reform cause.

Significant allies of reform included scholars whose work on Congress concluded that its structures posed an obstacle to effective government. Reform was necessary, they argued, for Congress to fulfill a positive role in policy-making during an era dominated by a powerful and dynamic presidency. These scholars shared the optimism in reform of its political advocates. "The assumption was that if institutions were fixed, liberalism would flourish and Congress would be revitalized: current institutional design discouraged policy innovation, shielded leadership, and weakened Congress," Zelizer writes (p. 87). Though the precise nature of their contribution to the reform impetus is clearly difficult to define, this study stresses the positive role of academic research and testimony. During the 1960s, their work "constituted another important realignment of the institutional environment surrounding Congress . . . that favored institutional change" (p. 91). The same period saw the reform coalition become a wider-ranging liberal coalition that included an array of interest groups—Common Cause, founded in 1970, notable among them—as well as a new generation of Democratic politicians; the target of

these reformers' concerns extended far beyond the entrenched influence of southern Democrats and embraced a much broader critique of the U.S. political system. Tensions between the Nixon administration and Congress, especially severe over the budget process and war powers, raised the stakes for liberals, for whom this conflict offered fresh evidence of the need for a more assertive and effective counterbalance to the executive. Significantly, when the coalition in favor of reform broadened and the key concerns of its members became more diverse, its main goals did not change. Zelizer emphasizes the importance of this unity of purpose, promoted by the initial success of reform advocates in defining congressional structures as the obstacle to better policy, in explaining their cause's achievements.

Apathy usually characterized the public view of congressional reform. The process described by Zelizer involved an elite-led movement that experienced success in pursuing its goals when it managed to win wider support within the ranks of the political elite. Nevertheless, the ideals of participatory democracy, together with the conviction that the structures of the committee era did not serve those ideals well, informed this elite's initiatives. Moreover, concerns about the potential disfavor among voters for politicians who avoided the cause of reform were significant on a number of occasions. During the 1950s reform advocates promoted their issue by arguing that the Democratic party might lose its majority status unless it lost its association with the congressional power of southern conservatives. Investigations of Congress by journalists, scholars, and reform politicians during the 1960s then elevated the issue's salience, because they "helped create a perception among politicians that there was a burgeoning interest in reform. This was important since legislators were concerned with determining the *potential* preferences of voters" (p. 77). When in 1970 the House Rules Committee initiated an investigation of seniority, this difficult breakthrough arrived partly because Democrats sought to thwart Republican efforts to steal reform as a political issue. Only in 1974, following Watergate and a scandal involving the personal behavior of House Ways and Means chair Wilbur Mills, was reform significant in electoral terms.

But the coalition enjoyed success even before the appearance of any electoral mandate. Legislation passed in 1972 reformed campaign finance through disclosure requirements and cost limitations; significantly, disagreements within the coalition and particularly the opposition of organized labor prevented the regulation of Political Action Committees. Another weakness of the legislation involved the absence of enforcement mechanisms, and the coalition provided evidence of its multifaceted strength when reform-minded interest groups, led by Common Cause, promoted its implementation through a campaign of publicity, monitoring, and litigation. Watergate, "a turning point in the politics of institutional reform," then revitalized the reform

impetus by making Republicans fearful of voters' retribution for the Nixon administration's crimes, while the self-interest of Democrats continued to encourage them to look for ways in which to close the financial gap between the parties' funding (p. 118). Legislation passed in 1974 did not create public financing for congressional campaigns, as reformers desired, but it did so for presidential races and it imposed contribution and spending limits, as well as establishing the Federal Election Commission (FEC).

The issue's forceful, though temporary, arrival as an issue important to voters ensured that politicians tackled many of the procedural problems identified by the reform coalition. As in the case of campaign finance reform, progress preceded as well as followed the Watergate scandal. A variety of reforms accepted by Congress between 1970 and 1974 undermined the power of committee chairs to ensure that these influential politicians remained responsive to the concerns of rank-and-file members. The success revealed the wisdom of short-term legislative tactics as well as the strength of the long-term campaign. The coalition ran publicity campaigns in support of their goals; reform leaders selected proposals that would maintain the coherence of the coalition and win bipartisan support. After the "Watergate babies" won election to Congress in the 1974 midterms, they helped to secure measures that finally fulfilled the reformers' initial vision: the Democratic party caucus in the House replaced three senior committee chairs and the Senate modified the filibuster.

When scandal provided an opportunity for reform, the coalition eagerly and successfully grasped its opportunities. The crimes of Watergate facilitated the passage of legislation reforming the financing of political campaigns. In the aftermath of Richard Nixon's resignation from the presidency, the "Watergate babies" then boosted the numbers of liberal reform advocates in Congress who successfully demanded institutional reform. Excellent in recounting the political implications of scandals and in persuasively developing the case for their larger historical significance, Zelizer underscores the importance of a number of scandals contributing to "the complex mixture of randomness and preexisting structure that produced institutional change in the 1970s" (p. 157). But scandal lost its power to encourage institutional change. A characteristic of the new Congress taking shape in the late 1970s was not any absence of scandal; indeed, the aggression of journalism helped to ensure that more cases of political abuses received exposure. Responses focused on individual transgressions rather than institutional shortcomings, however, and thus did not initiate meaningful calls for reform. The changing consequences of scandal help to explain the reform impulse's decline. So do changing priorities of Democrats who had promoted reform; they were comfortable with the institutional setting their reforms had fostered, while the nation's economic problems absorbed their attention instead of institutional

issues. They also discovered that it was often yet more difficult to secure the passage of legislation in the new Congress than the old. Meanwhile, the larger reform coalition fell prey to disagreements that undermined its effectiveness; it now lacked the necessary unity of purpose.

The coalition's vitality during the long quest for reform leads Zelizer to conclude that historians have often incorrectly assumed the decline or disappearance of the good-government, mugwump tradition during the twentieth century. Instead this tradition remained "alive and well," if modified to embrace the need for more direct political involvement in search of reform (p. 5). The nature of the reform agenda and of liberalism during the 1970s has received some thoughtful attention from scholars, and this study further helps to explain the paradox of how a desire to revitalize democratic processes involved solutions that led to renewed public disaffection with politics.[2] It also tackles another paradox of political change: the reformers sought to strengthen the political parties in Congress, yet they achieved this goal at the same time as parties continued to suffer a long decline as an electoral force. The book engages, moreover, with the irony of the early belief that reform would lead to programmatic liberal achievements. "The coalition believed," Zelizer notes, "that institutions were propping up a small group of conservative politicians who did not reflect the wishes of a liberal nation" (p. 6). Instead, liberals discovered that "the decline of the committee era had not meant a resurgence of progressive policies" (p. 262).

Congressional reform took place within a larger transformation of political institutions and structures, including the growth of interest groups and think tanks, an increasingly adversarial relationship between politicians and journalists, and the involvement of federal judges in adjudicating issues of legislative apportionment, as well as their growing role in the process of policy interpretation and implementation. Zelizer skillfully investigates the implications for Congress of change within other institutions, creating powerful support for the sometimes underappreciated significance of the wider context in which pieces of political history should be understood. Journalism receives special attention in Zelizer's account of change in Congress. The growing cynicism toward government of the fourth estate, associated with the Vietnam war as well as the Watergate scandal, exposed legislators to scrutiny far less deferential than that practiced by journalists of White's generation. The change of tone within press coverage of Congress in itself signaled a political transformation, while journalists' willingness, and even eagerness, to expose politicians' shortcomings provided the necessary ammunition with which the reform coalition could attack the institution's problems. The development of cable television facilitated the launch in 1979 of C-SPAN, providing full coverage first of the House and later also of the Senate, increasing the openness of their deliberations. The advent of congressional

television represented a reform that leaders had resisted, but its appearance provided opportunities, welcome to many in Congress, to speak directly to voters, free from the skeptical mediation of journalists. Both party leaders and political mavericks were able to do so, a development "that complemented the tendency of the new legislative environment to foster competing centers of power" (p. 207). Together, new journalistic practices and the availability of C-SPAN created a new climate for congressional politics.

The courts facilitated the transformation of Congress in similarly subtle yet significant ways. Supreme Court decisions on legislative apportionment, the result of liberal lawsuits, threatened the electoral security of conservatives in the rural South. During the 1960s, this threat gave hope to the liberal coalition; beyond the 1960s, the hope was gradually realized with the decline of this Democratic faction that had thrived during the committee era. But the Supreme Court also frustrated the reformers when its *Buckley* vs. *Valeo* decision of 1976 banned non-voluntary spending limits in campaigns and restricted the powers of the FEC.

The consequences of congressional reform were very different from those anticipated by its advocates. Reformers sought strong parties that were accountable to rank-and-file members, but the simultaneously centralizing and decentralizing structures and procedures that these concerns promoted did not seem to create the dynamic and responsive body they favored. "The schizophrenic character of the modern legislative process" provided opportunities both for strong initiatives of party leadership and for rank-and-file challenges to the leadership (p. 256). The career of Newt Gingrich forms the centerpiece of Zelizer's analysis of the transformed Congress. Gingrich exploited the new congressional structures and processes in promoting his conservative brand of Republican politics. With like-minded Republicans in the Conservative Opportunity Society, he made enterprising use of television, especially C-SPAN, starting in the early 1980s. He deployed the tools by which party leaders were now more responsive to rank-and-file members of Congress to promote conservatism and partisanship. Gingrich, moreover, attacked congressional Democrats for ethics violations not in pursuit of procedural reforms but as a means to bring voters' attention to their shortcomings in government, as well as to attack individual Democrats in power. But when the Republican party finally overturned Democratic majorities in 1994, Gingrich found that the pursuit of his "Contract with America" through strong party leadership in the House achieved partisan conflict with the Clinton administration but relatively few of his goals. It was not long before Gingrich himself lost his speakership amid accusations of ethics violations.

In investigating the extensive transformation of the political process since the 1960s, Zelizer tackles developments that relatively few historians have addressed.[3] Congress has particularly suffered in this regard. By contrast, a

wide-ranging literature within political science analyzes the rise of "the new American state" and its consequences for the formation of public policy. *On Capitol Hill* tackles a key aspect of this transformation, and its historical approach not only provides an account of the longer-term forces that shaped the reform impetus, but in doing so it also fashions insights different from those offered by political scientists who have studied the topic and whose work has often concentrated on legislators' individual behavior.[4] These insights often emerge from Zelizer's impressively extensive explorations of manuscript collections. Notable among recent contributions in political science is Eric Schickler's wide-ranging study of the "disjointed pluralism" that underpinned congressional reform since the late nineteenth century.[5] Like Schickler, Zelizer explores the competing motivations that encouraged members of Congress to support reform, finding, for example, that electoral concerns rarely were important among them. The scrutiny of archival detail about reformers in his account then elevates certain factors, such as race and scandal, as especially salient in understanding the complex dynamics of the reform impetus. Like Schickler, Zelizer develops a sophisticated picture of institutional change over time. Zelizer has written elsewhere of the benefits of interaction between historians and political scientists, especially those within the "American Political Development" school, in revitalizing political history.[6] In this book he provides compelling support for his case.

William White acknowledged in his memoirs that according to *Citadel*'s detractors "its enormous respect and affection for Tradition were fusty," but continued to defend his praise for the committee era, a time of careful deliberation and respectful debate. "Nowhere else, as it seemed to me, could I have met and known so diverse a group of men of a likably flawed brilliance in one direction or another," he wrote, viewing with alarm the harshly partisan, scandal-ridden Congress of the 1980s.[7] Zelizer persuasively depicts the problems of the era that inspired reform and the shortcomings of the system that reform produced. The process of change itself receives masterly treatment, both sensitive to the contributions to the process of individual political actors and perceptive about the larger institutional frameworks in which the process took place.

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1. William S. White, *Citadel: The Story of the U.S. Senate* (1957). White did not view the House with the same degree of enthusiasm, though his criticisms were not great enough to encourage him to support reform. White, *Home Place: The Story of the U.S. House of Representatives* (1965).

2. See, for example, Sidney M. Milkis, "Remaking Government Institutions in the 1970s: Participatory Democracy and the Triumph of Administrative Politics," in *Loss of Confidence: Politics and Policy in the 1970s*, ed. David Brian Robertson (1998), 51–74.

3. Gareth Davies, "The Great Society after Johnson: The Case of Bilingual Education," *Journal of American History* 88 (2002): 1406.

4. Gerald Gamm and John Huber, "Legislatures as Political Institutions: Beyond the Contemporary Congress," in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner (2002), 325–27.

5. Eric Schickler, *Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and the Development of the U.S. Congress* (2001).

6. Julian E. Zelizer, "Beyond the Presidential Synthesis: Reordering Political Time," in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, ed. Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (2002), 354–64; Zelizer, "History and Political Science: Together Again?" *Journal of Policy History* 16 (2004): 126–36.

7. William S. White, *The Making of a Journalist* (1986), 167.